

FILMING GALAPAGOS WILDLIFE

by

Sylvia Harcourt

Twenty years ago Alan & Joan Root made a famous film of Galapagos wildlife for Anglia Television with the Charles Darwin Foundation's Honorary Life Member, H.R.H. Prince Philip, speaking the commentary. This was the most important of the early films in Anglia's *Survival* series, and it raised substantial funds for the Charles Darwin Research Station. Since then there have been hundreds more *Survival* films and now an Anglia Television crew is at work on a whole new series of Galapagos wildlife films. The crew consists of Dieter & Mary Plage, a renowned camera team; Friedemann Köster, until recently Director of the CDRS; and Sylvia Harcourt, formerly the Station's acting ornithologist, who gives this account of work in progress. — Ed.

We have now been at work for a year and a lot of "footage" is already "in the can", but there is still much to be achieved. The Survival Anglia crew have been filming in the islands since December 1983 and hope to be here until June 1986, making several one-hour films for television.

So far, we have concentrated particularly on Española (Hood Island) and the life of the albatrosses and sealions. Some thrilling moments have occurred while filming surfing sealions, both underwater and on the surface. Not being a diver, I have not experienced the dramas under the waves but those above have been quite enough! Trying to surf the waves in a rubber dinghy alongside the sealions and getting caught between two rollers is excitement enough for one day. Any change in the speed of our boat would have meant either getting swamped by the breaker behind us or falling off the top of the one in front. "Don't worry", says the ever-calm Friedemann as I struggle into my life-jacket, "the waves will take you to the shore; you just get rolled around a little".

Albatrosses on their egg are easier to film; they just sit there. However we have had some fun as we try to photograph them taking off from the water. They start running across the sea into the wind and finally launch themselves off the top of a wave with much wing-flapping and leg-kicking. To judge just when and where they are going to take off required much time and experimenting in the little rubber boats.

Further trips are planned for 1985 with camps on Genovesa, Fernandina and Santiago, as well as several long diving trips and also flying trips, this latter a new venture for Galapagos. We now have a two-seater ultralight plane which can alight on either water or land and this will enable us to get aerial shots of the islands, craters, coastlines and, with luck, of whales, dolphins and birds flying close by, once the engine is cut and the plane glides in silence. A new view of Galapagos will be opened up to us and to worldwide television audiences.

The actual filming is not our only work. There are always repairs and cleaning of cameras, lenses, boats and camp equipment. Time is spent planning when and where trips should be made and working out the logistics of food, water and boats. And then there is the carrying! All the equipment has to be moved from the Darwin Research Station, where we are based, to the boat; then off the boat, up the shore, and from the shore to its temporary resting place in camp. This is then repeated in reverse order 3 weeks later to return to CDRS, recoup, restock and start off to the next site.

On the days when we set up or break camp, I wonder why I do this job. On all the other days there is ample compensation. It is wonderful to have the time to sit and watch new dramas unfold themselves before your eyes and know they are being recorded for eventual release on TV to be shared with millions. A further amazing thought is that these same sights were observed by Charles Darwin 150 years ago. Will future generations still be able to say the same in another 50 years?

That such a question can even be asked is a tribute to the foresight of the Charles Darwin Foundation and to the continuing determination of the Galapagos National Park Service to keep the islands as they are. The co-operation between GNPS, CDRS and the CDF is vital as insistent demands are made for commercial development. The beauty of these islands is their wildness, the fearlessness of the animals and the opportunity to escape from man's obsession with 'progress'. Let us hope they remain that way and that the Survival Anglia films will be a documentary and not an obituary.